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BRITISH



GUEST EDITOR
SIMON RIMMER

FROM BBC2'S *SOMETHING FOR THE WEEKEND*

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The image shows the interior of the Savoy Grill restaurant. The room is elegantly furnished with round tables covered in white tablecloths and dark upholstered chairs. The walls are a deep, textured red, and there are decorative light fixtures, including a glowing square one and a crystal chandelier. A large window or glass partition is visible in the background, reflecting the interior lights. The overall atmosphere is sophisticated and classic.

“Everyday I was encouraged to taste, taste, taste and so I tasted so many different wines that naturally my knowledge just grew and grew.”



The English Grape

quite a challenge. They would all shout at me in their native tongues, telling me not to serve this Chablis and to serve this particular Chablis instead, then they would reel off these names that I didn't understand, so essentially I was lost. It was a massive learning curve though because for those first six months I was thrown right into the deep end. Everyday I was encouraged to taste, taste, taste and so I tasted so many different wines that naturally my knowledge just grew and grew.

THE OLD GIRL

My time at the Savoy Grill has been a lot of fun. Before here I was working with Chris Cobin and Jeremy King at The Wolseley. Then I did a short stint at Clos Maggiore in Covent Garden. However, after a conversation with Stuart Gillies he wanted to know if I'd be interested to bring the old girl [The Savoy] back to her former glory and revive the menu back to a classic grill room style, it was an offer I couldn't refuse. The opportunity was amazing because although the wine list is not as expansive as other places, each and every wine on the menu has its own merit to be on the list, which is why the English wines that are on there really stand out. When you taste the English wines you actually think, "wow, that's pretty good, it has to go on the list."

On the list here at the Savoy Grill I have Chapel Down, their Bacchus 'reserve', which is the current vintage they're on at the moment. It's lovely wine and I like it so much we're serving it by the glass! It's one of my favourites. We're also serving Nyetimber, who have a pedigree for producing some amazing sparkling wine. We're currently serving an older vintage, the 2001 Blanc de Blancs. For me, it's one of the most amazing sparkling wines that this country is producing at the moment because it really does put some of the champagnes to shame.

In the eyes of the UK consumer we are very open and very welcoming towards what we produce in this country, and we do enjoy trumpeting our own produce, which is brilliant. Some of the clientele that come into the Savoy Grill are very savvy people who know about their wine. So when it comes to me recommending something to them they're generally very willing to try something different. A lot of our international customers, such as the American, French and Italian guests, are often surprised to see wines from the UK on the list and often want to try them just to see what we can do, in an almost tongue-in-cheek way. When they do try the British →

Christopher Cooper, head sommelier at the Savoy Grill, discusses why the rest of the world should watch out for England and its fantastic wines

Nobody ever tells you at school that you can become a sommelier, it's just one of those weird things that you fall into. In France, Switzerland and Italy it's seen as a valued career, it's seen as quite a prestigious thing to go into, but in the UK there are no schools that can be entered. No academies for sommeliering. There is the Wine and Spirit Education Trust (WSET), but they don't do sommelier courses, although this is in the pipeline. So nobody ever tells you it's a career you can get into.

I finished my degree at university, where I studied environmental science. After that I realised I much more enjoyed my job working in a bar, which was also a microbrewery, rather than I did my degree. While at the microbrewery I realised I had the ability to taste and note the difference between hop varieties in beer. I found it to be a really interesting thing to be able to distinguish how a hop can affect different flavours of beers. I therefore realised I had a very

good palette and could use this ability in tasting wine.

At first I had a very basic knowledge of wine. I mean I could tell the difference between Chardonnay and a Sauvignon Blanc, like most people, but I thought to myself, "I want to learn in some of the best places in the world in order to allow my career to get as far as it can." So I called up the Gordon Ramsay restaurant through Michelin on the Royal Hospital Road in Chelsea and spoke to the then head sommelier, Ronan Sayburn. I said to him that I'd like to become a sommelier and asked if I could have a job. He was a bit taken aback because he was busy with service, but he asked me to call him back later as he was interested to have a chat.

It took off from there and shortly after I slotted in to The Connaught, at the time when Gordon Ramsay was opening it with Angela Hartnett. I started in an entry-level commis sommelier position. Being the only Englishman in a French team was

wines though they're always wowed. I remember in particular a group of ten Frenchmen who came in once and they wanted a different wine per course and we served the Bacchus with their first course. They were all amazed by it and full of praise, and when I told them it was an English wine they were blown away. So it's very positive, it's nice to hear the good feedback. But to be honest, I think it sells itself, not for novelty value but because people are genuinely interested.

“I would recommend some of the British sparkling wines because they work better. I don't think the UK is at the stage yet where wines are designed aged because we don't have the climate to produce a wine for longevity.”

MISH-MASH VARIETALS

There are a lot of local grape varietals that have been used for years by English producers, but are either unpronounceable or not recognised internationally. British producers tend to use Bacchus and Seyval Blanc, even some weird ones like Müller-Thurgau. There are lots of unusual local grapes that are used but then you've got the international grape varietals, so you'll find a lot of Pinot Blanc, some Chardonnay's being grown [here in the UK], Pinot Noir's tend to work very well as red grape varietals. Therefore there is a real mish-mash in the UK. The producers often blend a lot of different grapes and you'll tend not to find single grape varietals simply because our climate is quite tough. So by mixing different grape varietals they've succeeded in ironing out their faults and making a much more linear, smoother wine.

I would recommend some of the British sparkling wines because they work better. I don't think the UK is at the stage yet where wines are designed aged because we don't have the climate to produce a wine for longevity. The wines we produce are ready to be drunk now. Some of the Pinot Noirs possibly may be better with a couple of years on them. Some of the champagnes definitely enjoy a bit of time to settle down because a lot of our sparkling wines tend to be quite dominant in acidity and have a dryness on the finish. After a couple of years they lose that aggressiveness and become a lot smoother.

PUTTING ENGLAND ON THE MAP

In the wine industry the recent success of the English wines in the International Wine & Spirit Competition has raised the profile of English wines a lot. We were all aware that English wines were doing well, but now people are reacting with, “oh gosh they're that good.” In wine circles we have a better understanding of the quality we have in this country. Internationally, countries have become alerted to the fact that English producers are making quite interesting stuff. So whether they're living in China, Argentina, Chile, or California they are all now hopefully aware that the British are coming!

I tried the winning wine recently, the Camel Valley Bacchus 2007, and was really very impressed with it because it has so much complexity and intensity, which is good. Our Chapel Down Bacchus is much lighter and more elegant, whereas the Camel Valley is much more perfumed and fragrant on the finish. It's a great wine and a deserved winner.

Also, at the recent Decanter World Wine Awards a UK category was introduced for the first time. The Camel Valley White Pinot 2005 and the Hush Heath Balfour Brut Rosé 2005 particularly impressed. They're both amazing wines and fully deserve the praise they are receiving.

It'll be really interesting to see how global warming affects the south coast and the wine producing regions of the UK, because we have quite a difficult time at





the moment, with different seasons and rain affecting different areas, so the winemakers are getting more proactive in dealing with those issues and having more resistant grape varietals, and being more active in the vineyards to prevent any spoilage in our erratic climate. The future for me, therefore, is bright in the fact that we are having better winemakers and better controls over our vineyards to produce more linear and classical wines. They're managing the problem of our climate a lot better. Quality is going up for sure because the English palette is becoming more cultured, so we're not going to tolerate any rubbish wines any more. Nowadays it's got to be a quality wine if it has an English label on it because the consumer is the one who is ultimately going to decide whether they want to buy it or not. We're finding more people investing in land around the south coast and around Kent in order to plant more vineyards. We are the next emerging market so we're finding French and Italian investors, some of the larger conglomerates, even some of the champagne houses are buying up areas along the south coast because they're seeing its potential. The future is very bright for English wine.

PANDORA'S BOX

Michel Roux Jr's Service was a fantastic show. Both Michel and Fred Sirieix are very dedicated and focused in trumpeting what we can produce in

the UK, which is great staff and a great service. I totally agree with their logic, that front-of-house is equally as important as chefing. For me in the UK, it's important to be an advocate of sommellerie and proving there is a career in wine service. Even for waiters and bartenders, who are looking to diversify their careers, have now had a whole pandora's box of opportunities, learning and development opened to them. It would be fantastic to visit universities and hospitality colleges to infuse that belief in people that there are levels to progress in this industry. It's still quite black and white when people think of hospitality and when it comes to restaurants people automatically think of chefs and waiters. There's so much more to it; from reception to sommeliers and maitre d's. *Service* was therefore great to see on TV because it's not been done before. There are not many people on television who are speaking about a career in the wine industry. Ronan Sayburn was involved in the programme as the wine guide and he truly is the most inspirational figure. So for Danielle Meenagh [sommelier winner of *Service*] to be working with Ronan now at the Hotel Du Vin, is a great opportunity for her. Programmes like that bring out the best in highlighting opportunities, such as a career in front-of-house. I hope it's inspired the masses of viewers to realise there is a viable path for them in this industry. There is instant gratification

in the job when somebody tells you the wine you've selected for them is perfect with their dinner and when they tell you that you are very good at what you do, it is the most rewarding thing.



BEST OF BRITISH wines



WORDS BY CHRISTOPHER COOPER AND JAMES MASSOUD / ZGPR, ENGLISH WINES GROUP, HUSH HEATH WINERY

1 Bacchus 'Reserve', Chapel Down 2009

Our Bacchus works very well with our more summery and fresher dishes. It has very classic English flavours of nettle and elderflower, with citrus notes. It works almost as a refreshing vinaigrette with salads. Even dishes such as simple grilled fish like a mackerel the wine works really well to refresh the palette and make you want to keep eating.

2 Nyetimber Blanc de Blancs 2001

The Nyetimber 2001 on our list is elegant and smooth, but I am sure when it was first bottled it was a lot more tight and intense in its astringency. But now, with a few years on it, it's mellowed into a nice, slightly mushroomy sparkling wine. A lot of the lighter dishes, such as salads, work very well with this wine. Watercress, rocket and frisée particularly suit the Nyetimber.

3 Camel Valley Bacchus 2007

With its intense flavours I would recommend the Camel Valley Bacchus with barbecued food. Even chicken soup is a great accompaniment to this wine, it really heightens the fragrance of the dish. Beans, pulses and asparagus also have their qualities brought out through the wonderful taste of this wine.

4 Hush Heath Balfour Brut Rosé 2005

The Brut Rosé is a great example of how we can do such fantastic sparkling rosé wines. Most people think we can only produce white wines and sparkling wines, but when we produce sparkling rosé it really works well and stands out. This rosé has a perfect perfumed style that makes the nose and the mouth refreshed a little bit more. Its fruitiness is great for picnics.

5 Camel Valley White Pinot 2005

This Pinot is splendid at refreshing the flavours and accentuating the aromatic quality of the dish. A wine is either going to cut straight through the dish or enhance it just that little bit more, and I think with this deftly perfumed English wine it will appeal to the masses. Simply fantastic with seafood or light pasta dishes.